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POVERTY AND PARENTAL DEPENDENCE AS AN OBSTACLE TO CHILD LABOR REFORM

BY HOMER FOLKS,

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The history of efforts for child labor legislation shows that they usually pass through three stages before reaching final success. When an agitation for a child labor law is started the first objection raised to it is that there are no children employed, or not at least any considerable number. After good people have gone to the mines and factories and have counted the children, and have gathered undeniable data disproving that statement, the next objection that is brought forward is that while there may be some children employed, after all such employment is a good thing for the children, and some very eminent men are named as having been employed in their childhood, by reason of which they became very distinguished when grown up.

After further research as to the evil effects of child labor, such as has been made at great length by our two assistant secretaries, and by many others, and after it has demonstrated beyond question that this employment of children is bad for the children, there still remains one stronghold to be taken. It is then said: Well, yes, there are some children employed, and that perhaps it is not altogether exactly what one would regard as ideal, but nevertheless the earnings of these children are absolutely necessary for the maintenance of their families. Many of them, it is said, are the children of widows. In other cases their fathers have deserted or are ill, and, except for the earnings of these children, the families would suffer and might starve.

That is the final stronghold to be captured by the friends of progressive legislation, not only for the restriction of child labor, but also for compulsory school attendance and for the exclusion of children from certain occupations dangerous to health or morals.

What was said by the friends of such legislation until quite recently was substantially this, that we did not believe that there were many children whose earnings were really needed by their families; that only a small proportion of the children could be the children of widows; that only a small proportion of those widows were dependent upon the earnings of their children, and that in so far as it might be true that the earnings of the children were needed by their families, it was, in our opinion, a great deal better that their income should be supplemented from some other source, and, furthermore, that it was our conviction that other resources would be at hand if those earnings were stopped. That was a word of hope and of confidence, and of conviction indeed, but it was not at that time founded on actual experience.

The task devolved upon me is to set forth the results of several years of actual experience in this direction, and if I speak with comparatively little first hand knowledge of child labor legislation and problems, I can speak with sixteen years of uninterrupted experience in the study and actual administration of charity.

During the past three years child labor legislation has been adopted in many of the states of the Union, and those who have been most active in procuring that legislation have taken up in earnest the task of providing supplementary incomes, when needed, to replace the earnings of children excluded from employment by the new legislation. We now have back of us several years of observation and experience of the actual facts as they exist, and we can now put the hope that we expressed a few years before to the test of practical application.

In New York City the local child labor committee some fifteen months ago took this ground, that whenever the child labor law made it impossible for any child under fourteen years of age to be employed, if his previous earnings were a necessary element in the family income, it would give to that family, through the child, what it called a scholarship—a sum of money equal, as nearly as could be ascertained—to the amount the child would have earned, that is to say, from one to three dollars per week.

An individual member of that committee very generously offered to contribute the sum of twenty-five hundred dollars per annum, or such sum not exceeding that amount as might be necessary to

provide these scholarships. Notice of this offer was sent to all the superintendents and principals of the public schools, to the State Labor Department, charitable societies, truant officers, settlement workers and social agencies generally.

As the result of that experiment, 490 applications for scholarships were received from October 1, 1905, to December 15, 1906. Of these, 160 have been referred elsewhere, because the children were not of the age at which they could have been employed previously, that is to say, they were over fourteen, or were under twelve, and were not within the provisions of the recently enacted law. Of the remaining 330 applications coming within the age limits, 95 scholarships have been granted, that is a little less than 30 per cent. Bear in mind that these figures relate to the entire City of New York, with its population in round numbers of 4,250,000 of people, and that with all the publicity attached to this offer, and in the space of nearly fifteen months, only 95 cases have been found in which these scholarships should be given.

These scholarships are adjusted to the probable amount of the child's earnings, ranging from \$1 to \$3 per week, and the total present outlay per month is at the rate of \$5,000 per year, that is to say, it is about \$100 per week. It seems possible that in the course of another year there may be some further increase, although the number is very nearly stationary at present. It seems to be well within the mark to say that \$10,000 at the very most will meet all the deficiencies that arise from the discontinuance of the employment of children by the new law, in so far as such income is a necessary part of the living expenses of the families. Here, as in nearly all the other cities reporting, the scholarship continues until the child reaches the age of legal employment, unless the need therefor ceases at an earlier date.

I have been struck, in examining the reports which have been received by the National Child Labor Committee from each of the larger cities of the country, on this question, to find the very different conditions that seem to exist in different cities. In Chicago, for instance, where a similar plan has been in operation, under the joint auspices of the Consumers' League and the Bureau of Charities, the total number of scholarships awarded during a period of three years is but fifteen. Only a small percentage of those who

filed applications for scholarships are found to be actually in need. The scholarships are largely provided by the women's clubs, though the investigations of the families and their oversight is in the hands of the Bureau of Charities. The scholarship is usually \$3 per week.

In Philadelphia, the Public Education Association and Child Labor Committee have established the same plan, and there during the year ending June 30, 1906, the number of scholarships granted has been twenty-eight—about one-fifth of the total number of applicants. There also the investigation of the family is by the Charity Organization Society. The scholarships, ranging in amount from 75 cents to \$4 per week, are adjusted, not on the basis of the probable earnings of the child if employed, but on the actual need of the family.

In St. Louis there is a compulsory school attendance law from which children may be excused, lawfully, on the ground of extreme poverty. The cases that have been so excused were inquired into recently as to the merits of the excuse, and it is reported (July, 1906) that so far as the investigation had gone it indicated that not more than fifty full term exemptions were granted during the past year, and judging by the results so far secured about twenty of these would prove to be cases calling for material assistance if the children attended school, and that the total expenditure for such aid would probably be covered by the sum of \$1,000 per year. The Secretary of the Missouri Child Labor Committee reports: "In the case of parents claiming permanent or long-term exemptions in order that their children might work in stores or factories, a successful effort is being made this year in St. Louis to eliminate all such child labor by providing scholarships for children recommended for exemption by the truant officer. The chairman of the executive committee of the Children's Protective Alliance, Mr. W. O. Nelson, has proposed to the women's clubs of the city to share equally with them the expense of such scholarships; and pending action by the women's clubs, Mr. Nelson is personally providing for all these cases, after they have been reported on by the truant officer and carefully investigated by the agents of the St. Louis Provident Association. The cases, of course, accumulate gradually through the year as the truant officers continue their work, so that it is impossible to say at this date how many will present themselves *per annum*. I have not Mr. Nelson's authority

to say what the expense involved has thus far been. But a rough preliminary investigation of last year's long-term exemption cases indicated that the number of children properly entitled to scholarships would certainly not exceed fifty, and would probably be less than thirty. Something over a third of the cases approved for exemption by the attendance office are rejected after the Provident Association's investigation."

In Pittsburg, during the year ending June 30, 1906, the number of scholarships granted was three, the amount being \$2 per week in each case.

The reply from Boston is, to my mind, very significant. I will quote one or two sentences: "Child labor has not been an issue in Massachusetts for many years. In the statutes of 1880 practically no employment of children under fourteen was permitted in school hours. There has been, therefore, in those who are dependents, no new problem to meet by keeping the children in school until fourteen, and there are no special scholarship funds or societies for such children. . . . The public outdoor relief, and the private charitable societies have always worked with the enforcement of the child labor law in mind." That is to say, the standards of relief, both on the part of the public authorities and of the private societies, have been such as contemplate a full enforcement of the child labor law; so that instead of receiving aid in the form of scholarships from some newly-established agency, the parents in case of need receive the aid in the form of relief either from the public officers or from private societies. That appears to be the state of affairs in a number of other cities. In Buffalo, for instance, we find that the health department sometimes refers families to the Charity Organization Society, where the operation of the law would otherwise seem likely to work hardship. The families receive relief on the usual plans, but without any system of scholarships.

In Minneapolis, the Associated Charities have adopted the scholarship plan, and during the year ending June 30, 1906, ten full scholarships were granted, and in some thirty other cases partial relief was given—a comparatively large number for a city of that size, as compared with other cities. About 10 per cent of the applications were approved for some form of aid.

It is to be noted that in most of the cities, but not in New

York, the amount of the scholarship is not based on the probable earnings of the child were he employed, but on the actual need of the family, aiming to make up the full amount that the family requires in order to live in accord with reasonable standards.

The Associated Charities in Kansas City reports that, while the scholarship idea as such has not been developed there, that society assists, from private sources, widows with children, so that the children may attend the public schools and need not be employed.

Such also is the report from Indianapolis, with the further statement that when the recent truancy and factory laws were passed it was expected that there would be a large increase in the demand upon the funds of that society for aiding widows, but as a matter of fact, there was but very little increase of that character.

In the City of Baltimore, the law has recently taken effect, and a plan has been adopted by which the bureau of labor and statistics refers to the Charity Organization Society all cases of apparent hardship, most of which, thus far, upon investigation, have been found not to be cases of actual need.

From Milwaukee, we have the report that there are no scholarships, but that the county superintendent of the poor extends additional relief to certain families when it would otherwise be a hardship to require the child to attend school. There are several such cases, and the plan is resulting in better attendance in the public schools.

The examination of these reports, with a study of the letters accompanying them, has suggested to me several conclusions, and especially this one—and I speak for myself only, and not as representing the views of the National Child Labor Committee, having had no opportunity for conference with them on this subject—that this is at bottom essentially a phase of the relief problem; that it is not primarily an educational problem or a problem of enforcement of law, but is a relief problem; and that all moneys given out in the form of scholarships, and under these circumstances, should be given with the same care and with the same adequacy and upon the same principles as govern the best relief work.

It is not an exceptional thing to find that there are new demands upon relief-giving societies, and that the standards heretofore deemed adequate are no longer adequate. It is frequently neces-

sary for such agencies and for such public officials to revise their judgments as to what constitutes adequate relief, and this is, after all, the fundamental thing in all charitable work. We may have been in error sometimes in the past, and have been superficially satisfied in entering upon the record of a family that it is "self-supporting" without looking far enough ahead, and without considering whether the family is self-supporting with full justice to its future, as well as to its present. It is quite possible that the family may be self-supporting now, but in such a manner as to insure the fact that in a very few years it cannot possibly be self-supporting. The incipient consumptive can remain at work and support his family for a considerable time, but with the certain result that at the end of a short time we will have upon our hands a widow and a family of children. We have revised our standards of relief-giving in view of our most recent knowledge of the treatment of tuberculosis. Similarly a widow can go out to work by the day for six days in the week, and thus be "self-supporting" and maintain her family, but with the certain result that in a comparatively short time her health must give way and we shall have upon our hands for an indefinite time a woman broken in health and a family of children. Under these circumstances, the families are not self-supporting in any proper sense of the term. Our conception of the amount and character of the relief that should be given must be extended and extended and again extended; and it is a similar step that we must take in applying our relief system to families in which there are children who would be employed except for our child labor laws.

While all this is true, and while in my opinion the scholarship is a passing phase of the relief problem, it has many tactical and temporary advantages. Charity has come to be something of a yellow dog. No one likes to receive charity; few persons particularly care to be engaged in dispensing relief. Institutions supported by charitable gifts always prefer to be known under some other heading. It may be well, therefore, not to raise that question for the moment and to disguise the relief under some pleasanter name. Furthermore, of course, those who are instrumental in securing child labor legislation feel, and very properly so, a certain moral responsibility for seeing that hardship does not result, even in a small degree, from the proposed legislation. Therefore, it is entirely

proper and justifiable—it is in some ways desirable—that they should be able to say to the community and to the legislators and to the public authorities that they know of their positive knowledge that the families deprived of the earnings of their children are not suffering; and that as an evidence of good faith they, from funds collected themselves, have met the need.

There are perhaps many communities in which relief work is not sufficiently well informed and organized, or is not sufficiently strong to meet this situation, and until they can be improved—until the relief agencies, public and private, can be educated and strengthened, and induced to adopt the larger view, it may be wiser and, in fact, may be highly important, that some temporary provision of scholarships be made.

The important thing, however, from the point of view of the National Child Labor Committee, is this, that the experience of the past four years has given us the measure of the problem. It has demonstrated the soundness of our earlier position; that the number of such families needing relief is small; that funds would be forthcoming to meet this need; that the problem is an easily managed one; and that poverty and parental dependence should not be an obstacle to progressive child labor legislation.